

# Patrick Madden

INTERVIEWED BY AMELIA CHESLEY

WEB: QUOTIDIANA.ORG

**I can tell you have a great love of words. Has that always been the case?**

I honestly don't recall any particularly linguistic moments from my childhood. I do know that during high school, I was very interested in artistic expression, but this usually took the form of drawing. I was involved in the literary magazine at both schools I attended, but mostly I worked on illustration. During my junior year, for some reason I thought it would be interesting to write a story that narrated a kid's fall from a tree. It wasn't. I have only a vague recollection of what I wrote, probably for my own protection. Even as I turned it in to the editors, I knew it was garbage.

In college, I took one creative writing course, which required students to research family history and elaborate (fictionalize) the stories we found there. My grade was a deserved B-. Even when I got into the master's program at Brigham Young University, my first application to do a creative thesis was rejected by the same professors who hired me to teach creative writing six years later. So I think that I essentially learned to write during my graduate study.

**What makes essays different from other genres? What is your favorite thing about the essay form?**

First off: the term essay is often misused and abused. When I say "essay," I mean a ruminative, associative, meditative, subversive bit of prose, something that is very hard to pin down, but that certainly doesn't set out with its conclusion in mind, and never tries to convince you of anything.

Essays are open-ended, full of wonder (and wondering), curious, playful, conversational, and companionable. They resist definition, partly because they subvert the notion of genre. An essay differs from other literary genres mainly in its focus on thinking.

In an essay, I get not only a narrative, I get an actual author's mind working through experience, perhaps narrating a bit, perhaps researching, perhaps imagining. Many writers have stated that an essay is an artistic representation of a mind at work. And that's my favorite thing about the essay form.



**Tell us a little bit about putting together your book *Quotidiana*. Does publishing an entire book feel different from publishing individual essays?**

Yes, but I'm not entirely sure what a "book" might feel like. My own book is simply a collection of individual essays, most of them already published. This is fine, I think, but there must be a different kind of thing going on in a novel, for instance, or a two-hundred-page treatise on salt or cod or the rise and fall of ancient cultures. If somebody asks me what my book is about, I struggle to encapsulate it. Once, after I stumbled through an inadequate explanation, my wife, who had overheard, told me, "You better come up with a better description, because nobody's going to want to buy *that* book." At the same time, I think other essayists can appreciate that the book is simply a slightly related collection of essays. I bet Charles Lamb had a hard time writing a back-cover description for his *Essays of Elia* too.

In any case, for years I have been interested in the way many essays can take seemingly insignificant subjects and work them into a glorious extrapolation of meaning. Virginia Woolf's "The Death of the Moth" is just one example of this. During my doctoral program at Ohio University, I stumbled upon the word *quotidian*, meaning "everyday, routine, mundane, etc." and from it fashioned *quotidiana*, which I conceive of as a collection of such things (similar to "Americana" or "Indiana"). I began to write essays in that vein. One of them begins with changing my daughter's diaper. Another is me washing grapes in the sink. Another came from my mind wandering during another writer's reading.

Once I had enough of them (eleven, ultimately), I started piecing together proposals, which I sent to several publishers that I knew had published essay collections in the past. I did this work myself because the couple of agents I had contact with ran away screaming when I said my book was a collection of essays. "No money!" they said. I got

lucky in that my book was runner-up in a national contest (sponsored by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs) and was accepted by one of the first presses I contacted, the University of Nebraska, which has a great tradition of publishing important works of literary nonfiction.

From that point to actual publication is about two years (the book will be out in March 2010). I've spent that time getting high-resolution scans of a few dozen images, copyediting, failing to write an adequate description, etc. It's not tiring, though, because I'm really quite excited about the book.

### You originally studied physics. Do you feel like your science background has made a difference in your creative writing?

It must, right? Most superficially, my writing often contains some scientific or mathematical musings, and not only on the metaphorical level. One of my essays, for instance, wonders about vastness: the realm of things that seem nearly infinite (though I'm not sure "nearly infinite" can really mean anything). I wondered, first, about how many grapes there are in the world. This got me to thinking about God's promise to Abraham: that his descendants would number as the sand, the dust, or the stars. So I tried to calculate how many grains of sand there are on the earth (approximately  $1.5 \times 10^{22}$ ), which led me to Archimedes' *Sand Reckoner*, in which he calculated the number of grains in a sand-filled universe. I covered a lot of ground, much of it scientific, but the roots of the essay remained in my own family experiences. That same basic process describes a lot of my essays.

### What approach do you take in teaching writing? What is the most important advice you have for your students and other aspiring writers?

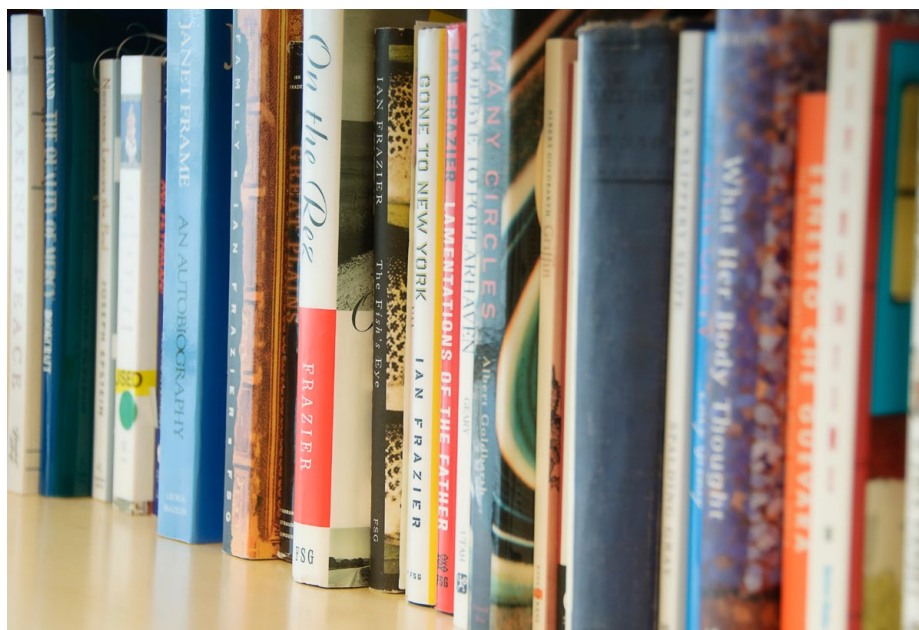
I'm afraid it's not very original, but it's time-tested, so I stick with the way I was taught: I assign a lot of reading from exemplary essayists, then I say "Go, and do likewise." That said, I do require students to own their influences, to consciously

adopt techniques and styles and forms that they find in the writers they enjoy (selected from among the writers I require them to read, which they wouldn't likely read otherwise).

For instance, I typically divide a semester into twelve units, each one with a theme such as "place" or "childhood" or "holiday" or "quotidian." The readings I assign during that week or so all focus on that theme, all offer examples of essays written in that subgenre. Then I ask students to select six of the twelve themes and to write their own essays within those themes, under those influences. Another thing I do that's a bit unlike most teachers is I assign a *lot* of essays from the Great Dead. I firmly believe that writers should be immersed in the tradition of their form.

Likewise, my advice is not very profound. I have observed that what sets successful writers apart from others is sticktoitiveness. There are a lot of people with writing talent out there; there are a lot of people with the desire to write. But the ones who get published are the ones who never give up. That's assuming that getting published is your goal. It doesn't have to be. Writing is valuable even if you only show it to your mom.

So, besides that, here's another bit of recycled advice: read voraciously in the form that most interests you. This will sound like a commercial, but I really don't make a dime from it: if you want to write essays, read the Great Dead writers I



mentioned just now on <http://quotidiana.org/>. It's free and easy to access, and we're even slowly eliminating a lot of the typos.

### **What writing role models do you have? Have your role models changed as you've gained experience?**

My absolute favorite writers are the following, you should read them: Chris Arthur, Brian Doyle, Ian Frazier, Eduardo Galeano, Scott Russell Sanders, W. G. Sebald, William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Michel de Montaigne. I have their portraits on my office wall. The last three are long dead, which means you can get their essays for free (I recommend <http://quotidiana.org/> for all your essay needs). You'll notice that they are all men. I'm sorry about that. I like a lot of women writers, but none has ever bowled me over the way these fellows have. To qualify a bit: my favorite women essayists are Desirae Matherly and Sara Levine, but they've published only in journals; no books yet.

### **What do you most hope to accomplish through your writing?**

I'm not so sure. I have very small aspirations in terms of fame and fortune, though I've never turned down an editor's offer of payment (this usually means I can take my wife on a date). I am content to be a "minor essayist," which, as my friend Brian Doyle points out, is pretty much the best an essayist can hope for anyway because there are no major essayists.

On the selfish side of things, I love the process of writing, because it allows me to focus my thoughts on a subject and spin out connections that I wouldn't normally entertain, simply because there's usually too much demanding my attention.

So, essaying is akin to meditating, aparting myself from the harried world.

Even with no external consequences (no publications, no money, no recognition), I'd benefit from writing essays because of the peace they bring me. But since my essays do sometimes get published, I'm very pleased when they strike a chord with a reader and cause him or her to think more deeply about something or to experience a small bit of that peaceful pause from an otherwise stressful existence.

### **What spiritual rewards do you see from composing experiences and thoughts into essay form?**

Ah. I think that writing essays opens one up to the wonders of the world flowing past, usually unnoticed or unappreciated. It also humbles a writer to recognize his place in an infinite world. Essays help me balance heart and mind; simplify my existence; achieve a wisdom from the past; interrogate my ignorances; recognize and rejoice in complexity; resist easy answers and ready-made explanations; exercise a useful, playful contrariness...

Essaying is a way of being that coincides greatly with following Christ's example. When Jesus said that we should become as little children, I think he meant that we should be humble and teachable, that we should maintain a sense of wonder at everyday miracles, even the ones we've seen a thousand times before. Not only that, but no matter how intelligent or mature we think we are, we are children in relation to God. He will always be so far beyond us that we'd better be humble about our paltry understanding. Essayists recognize this better than other people. Or, when people recognize this, they engage their inner essayist.

Not long ago, my students asked me if a person who didn't like essays could be happy or could be a good person. I said yes, but I'm not friends with those people. Then I thought better of it and revised my comment to *no*. This may seem like extremism (and it is, for sure), but I really think that each person's best self is an essayist. We may not engage this part of our being as often as we should; we may have buried away our curiosity in favor of rushing headlong into the frantic system of twenty-first-century life, but at times we all stop our heedless getting and think deep joyous thoughts, don't we? ■

